

FOLKLORE IN THE MODERN CULTURE OF LITHUANIA AND LATVIA

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Abstract

The present article focuses on the issue of references to folklore and mythology present in contemporary art in Latvia and Lithuania. Any scholar analysing Baltic cultures or even a person visiting Lithuania or Latvia for the first time and wishing to learn something about the culture of these countries will quickly notice that it contains a kind of a 'folklore paradigm' present in all aspects of everyday life, as well as in modern literature, music and visual arts. Folklore and the old world-views connected with it infiltrate professional art through various channels: (1) Subconsciously, as a part of spiritual experience, ancient beliefs still present in everyday life; (2) Consciously or subconsciously through traditional culture, which includes mythology as a 'cultural relic'; (3) Consciously, if the artist makes deliberate references to mythology, studies it to find the answer to the eternal question of the meaning of life and conveying this meaning through works of art. Each day takes us further away from the times when mythology and folklore were the only means of conveying thoughts on the world and humankind as a whole. Nonetheless, folklore still inspires Lithuanian and Latvian artists. The 'high culture' of these countries, created by educated people, repeatedly returns to the motif of the lost Baltic paradise, the archetypical pagan community. Unfortunately, Lithuanian and Latvian literature is still relatively unknown in Poland and in the world, possibly due to its hermetic nature. The modern music and visual arts created by Baltic peoples are widely known and valued abroad, yet their literature is very difficult to translate, not as much because of linguistic concerns, but due to the frequent use of references to folklore and mythology that make these texts incomprehensible to people who lack knowledge about these cultures.

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Artykuł poświęcony jest zagadnieniu sięgania do folkloru i mitologii we współczesnej sztuce litewskiej i łotewskiej. Zarówno badacz kultur bałtyjskich, jak też człowiek który pierwszy raz przebywa na Litwie lub na Łotwie i chce poznać kulturę tych krajów szybko uświadomi sobie, że istnieje w niej pewien „paradygmat folklorystyczny”, występujący we wszystkich dziedzinach życia codziennego oraz we współczesnej literaturze, muzyce i sztukach plastycznych. Do sztuki profesjonalnej folklor, i wraz z nim ujawniana przez niego dawny sposób postrzegania świata, przenika różnymi drogami: 1. Nieświadomie, jako część doświadczenia duchowego, jako dawne wierzenia, które jeszcze przetrwały w życiu codziennym; 2. Świadomie lub nieświadomie poprzez kulturę tradycyjną, w której mitologia się utrwaliła jako „kulturowa skamieniałość”; 3. Gdy artysta świadomie nawiązuje do mitologii, studiuje ją, szuka w niej odpowiedzi na pytanie o sens życia i przekazywanie tego sensu w dziele sztuki. Z każdym dniem oddalamy się od czasów, kiedy mitologia i folklor były jedynymi sposobami ujmowania całokształtu świata i człowieka. Folklor jednak

nadal inspiruje litewskich i łotewskich artystów i w sztuce „wysokiej”, wykształconej, raz po raz powraca się do utraconego bałtyjskiego raj, archetypicznej pogańskiej wspólnoty. Niestety literatura litewska i łotewska pozostaje w Polsce i na świecie mało znana, możliwe, że z powodu pewnej jej hermetyczności. O ile sztuki plastyczne i muzyka współczesna Bałtów są powszechnie znane i cenione w innych krajach, o tyle ich literaturę bardzo ciężko przetłumaczyć – nie tyle z powodów bariery językowej, ale częstych cytatów folklorystycznych i mitologicznych, które uniemożliwiają poznanie literatury bałtyjskiej osobom bez odpowiedniej kompetencji kulturowej.

Key words: folklore, modern art, Lithuania, Latvia, the Baltic peoples.

Any scholar analysing Baltic cultures or even a person visiting Lithuania or Latvia for the first time and wishing to learn something about the culture of these countries will quickly notice that it contains a kind of a ‘folklore paradigm’ present in all aspects of everyday life, as well as in modern literature, music and visual arts. Latvians and Lithuanians consider folklore to be an immanent part of their culture. All Baltic nations are connected through ties of kinship. History, in turn, drew Lithuanians towards their southern and eastern neighbours and Latvians to the German-speaking part of Europe. Lithuanian folklore does not contain any noticeable earlier layers of non-Baltic culture but includes many elements common with the Belarusian culture. In contrast, in Latvian folklore the Finno-Ugric component is still apparent, beneath layers of Baltic culture. This is the reason for the numerous analogies between Estonian and Latvian art.

The complex and convoluted history of these countries provides a direct or indirect explanation of many facts and phenomena related to the nature of the Baltic nations’ folklore, especially its ubiquity in the national culture of these countries. Lithuanians were the only Baltic peoples that managed to establish their own state, the only pagan country in mediaeval Europe. Faced with the threat of the Teutonic Order, Lithuanians extended their rule not only to the lands populated by Baltic tribes. The period of the union between Poland and Lithuania is not assessed favourably by contemporary Lithuanians, mainly due to the polonisation of the higher social strata of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which took place uncompelled. The Lithuanian tongue, which preserved the largest number of archaic features among all Indo-European languages (Polański 1999, p. 345), remained in use only among the common folk. The polonisation of Lithuanian gentry stalled the development of Lithuanian literature, but ensured the survival of ancient Lithuanian folklore. Its rich forms were preserved until the Second World War and may be observed even today.

In the 13th century Latvian territory was seized by the order of the Livonian Brothers of the Sword, incorporated into the Teutonic Knights (1237). Latvia remained under Teutonic rule until 1561, when the Grand Master of the Order handed the territory (then called Livonia) to Poland. The southern part of Livonia became a vassal state in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, whereas the remaining part – including the

capital city of Riga – came under the rule of the Polish Crown. The situation continued until the Treaty of Oliwa (1600), when it was decreed that the Polish Crown would keep the southern part of Livonia (the so-called Polish Livonia), while the northern part with Riga became the Swedish Livonia. As a result of the Treaty of Nystad, signed in 1721, the Swedish Livonia was ceded to Imperial Russia. The southern part of Livonia came to Russia half a century later (1772), after the First Partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. In the interwar period Latvians created their first national state. After the Second World War, however, both Lithuania and Latvia were forcibly incorporated into the USSR. They emerged again as independent states in 1990.

This brief historical overview constitutes a necessary introduction to any analysis of several significant features of the culture of the Baltic peoples. It explains why, despite historical differences, their national rebirth could only take place in the late 19th century. Both the Lithuanian and the Latvian society lacked their own elites, as the higher strata only spoke a foreign language – Polish or German. Thus, Baltic nations could only seek their identity in peasant culture, the continuation of which may be seen in their modern national culture.

Baltic languages offer an exceptionally broad selection of oral literature. The collections of the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences and the Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art of the Latvian Academy of Sciences contain millions of songs, folk tales, sayings, etc. Folk songs – the so-called *dainos* – constitute the most important part of both the mentioned collections, due to the sheer amount of the material, their cultural and historical significance as well as their rich symbolism still present in the art of the mentioned countries (Vike-Freiberga 1976). Poles manifested their interest in Lithuanian and Latvian folk songs already in the 19th century (Kolberg 1989; Chodźko 1879). Members of the Vilnius Romantic Movement sought inspiration in the ethnically non-Polish lore of the Lithuanian, Belarusian or Latvian lands.

Latvian and Lithuanian folk songs differ significantly with regard to the form. Lithuanian *dainos* are always long – some of them have several dozen stanzas – and their metrical form is very varied. Most Latvian songs, with the exception of ballads, consist of only a single stanza. Their concise and succinct form is evocative of Japanese *haiku*. Latvian experts on folklore divide the *dainos* into ‘short’ ones (trochaic, four to six verses long) and ‘long’ ones (dactylic, up to ten verses long). Multi-stanza songs constitute but a small fraction of Latvian *dainos* (Barons 1893–1915; Greble 1979–1984; Greble 1955–1957; Šmits 1936–1939).

The folk songs of all Baltic peoples are lyrical in nature. Fragments of these lyrical songs lead some scholars to believe that epic *dainos* did exist (Egle 1935, p. 253). It is, however, likely that the lyrical character of the songs is the reason behind the relative ignorance displayed by other nations with regard to Baltic folklore. The lack of popularity of Baltic *dainos* is all the more striking when compared to the fantastic

'career' of the *Kalevala*. It may be surmised that this is due to the fact that epic narratives may be translated into other languages without losing the power to inspire feelings and convey imagery. In contrast, in lyrical poetry the form and the content are bound so inseparably that the medium itself becomes the message. The value or even the essence of the message is often lost in translation, when the form of expression is changed. The inevitable difficulties related to translating lyrical poetry may be regarded as the main reason why Baltic folk songs never received as much attention as they deserved (Oinas 1978, p. 154). In contrast with fables, which create a context for themselves, the *dainos* cannot be translated without providing comprehensive notes on the ethnography, anthropology, semiotics, linguistics, as well as the traditional mentality and spirituality of the Baltic peoples.

The above statement holds true not only for folklore, but also for modern literature which often draws from rural culture or mythology. This trend may be exemplified by the works of leading contemporary Lithuanian poets such as Marcelius Martinaitis (1995) and Sigitas Geda, or by the prose of Saulius Tomas Kondrotas, in which pagan imagery and a folk vision of the world mingle with the reality of modern life (Kondrotas 1996). Read without additional information on Baltic folklore and mythology, such literature may be perceived as too hermetic and incomprehensible for someone from outside this cultural circle.

The classification of Latvian and Lithuanian *dainos* proves that no aspect of life lacked its own type of song. From time immemorial, the singing of folk songs was an inherent part of the life of rural communities – be it farmers, fishermen or huntsmen. The Balts' first contact with folk songs was in the cradle; later they learnt to listen, repeat them, sing and compose *dainos* in the course of their entire lives: at weddings, while working, during parties, at funerals, etc. (Greble 1955–1957; Greble 1979–1984; Greble 1950).

One common feature of both Latvian and Lithuanian culture is the fact that the *dainos* were passed down from generation to generation and sang primarily by women. In rural communities women were assigned the role of guardians of customs and traditional rituals. It was them who passed down ancient beliefs, e.g. through their own poetic works – the *dainos* they composed. It must be noted that *dainos* have had a profound impact on the shape of Lithuanian and Latvian poetry; they are still a living practice, present in modern culture (Vike-Freiberga 1976; Venclova 1991a). Marcelius Martinaitis admits that some of his earlier poems were “inspired by the tradition of sung poetry, in which the text is not as much seen as heard, and therefore appropriately intoned, ‘voiced’” (Martinaitis 1986, p. 30).¹ This statement clarifies why some poems by Lithuanian or Latvian authors are ‘untranslatable’ and may only be ‘heard’. In modern times, the custom of singing folk songs is kept alive by the intelligentsia,

¹ All quotations were translated solely for the purpose of the present article [translator's note].

especially in urban areas. Members of this social group willingly gather in order to sing and sometimes establish more or less organised singing bands.

Folklore was and still is a very significant factor in the national identity both for Lithuanians (where the traditions reach back to the history of the pagan state) and Latvians. The latter peoples did not have the opportunity to establish their own state until 1918. As was the case with Finns, Germans and Russians considered Latvians a small underdeveloped community without their own culture or history. For this reason, the first publications of Finnish and Latvian songs – the *Kalevala* edited by Elias Lönnrot and the *Latvju dainas* by Krišjānis Barons (Barons 1893–1915) became the cornerstone in the construction of national identity and initiated a rebirth of folk culture. Collections of ancient songs that had left no trace in documents, but survived in living tradition, enabled these small and forgotten groups to rediscover their lost history and opened the gateway to a feeling of community, indispensable for the development of a nation in the modern sense. It is a fascinating example of ‘invented tradition’, in which the key role falls to folk songs (Hobsbawm, Ranger 2008).

The attention of writers and experts on folklore is drawn by three characteristic features of Baltic folklore. It is generally assumed that the first distinguishing characteristic is the great variety of folk song types (there are special tunes intended for weddings, works in the field, household activities, funerals, annual celebrations etc.) and their large number. Even in modern times a single performer from the more conservative regions of Lithuania or Latvia (Dzūkija and Latgale) may produce up to six hundred songs. The second of the mentioned distinctive features is the depth to which folklore is rooted in the everyday life of Lithuanians and Latvians. According to a Lithuanian poet and journalist Tomas Venclova: “Most nations today seek for their own past, their roots; while the Lithuanian nation does not seek the past anymore, but lives it. Lithuanian culture is, so to speak, submerged in the ocean of folklore. [...] Folklore rituals often constitute a part of the everyday life of city dwellers; folklore archetypes have not a perceived, but an indubitable influence on the perception of nature, birds and plants, life and death; sayings that come from folklore constitute one of the most important elements of everyday colloquial speech. Until recently, Lithuanian folklore transcended the boundaries of people’s lives. Song did not exist in life; it was life that existed in song: songs were sung even before a person was born, a funerary lament sounded after they were dead. Folklore defined the boundaries and composed the model for everyday life – it may be argued that it was a benchmark to measure each step, a benchmark that gave significance to love, to every chore, every little thing in life” (Venclova 1991a, p. 258). Songs also constitute a linguistic effusion – they have preserved many archaic forms. The third and final distinguishing feature of the folklore of Baltic peoples is its archaic nature. Lithuanians converted to Christendom very late for European standards. Both in Lithuania and Latvia the clergy conducted their services in foreign languages unknown to the people – Latin, Polish or German. This meant

that religious education was not easily spread among the common folk. Numerous relics of religious syncretism survived in Lithuania and Latvia until the 19th century; some traces are observable even today. Old pagan deities remained present in folklore, hidden under a Christian guise. This is not a rare phenomenon in Europe, yet the scale of it observable in Lithuania and Latvia may only be compared to Christianised cultures from outside Europe, e.g. in Latin America. Baltic folklore conceals archaic mythological layers. Latvian songs and Lithuanian fables include deities from the old Baltic pantheon, such as Perkūnas – the lord of thunder, aided by the god of fire and iron – Kalvis; Žemyna – the goddess of earth and vegetation, Bubilas – a protective deity of bees, Gabija – the goddess of the family hearth, Saulė (the Sun) who marries Menulis (the Moon). These names are still repeated in colloquial language; some of them have been incorporated into the Christian tradition. Thus, Dievas (the deity of the sky) became the Christian God and Velnias, a protective deity of the animals, was identified with the Christian Devil, while his divine function was taken over by St. George. Folklore still uses the motifs of mythological archetypes, such as the cosmic tree that links the three realms of the universe – the heavens, the earth and the underworld, the past and the future. Mythological significance is given to birds and beasts: the goat and the ox, the cuckoo, the falcon and, most of all, snakes – associated with sexuality and family life. In such a perception of the world, numbers are not insignificant. Some of them have magical power. This tendency is exemplified by the recurrence of the numbers 3 and 9. They are mentioned in connection with the number of branches on the cosmic tree, the number of members in the families of gods or mythical creatures. The Laumės (faes) are always seen in threes, while the flying deer that brings light on Christmas has nine horns (Toporov 2000).

It is also significant that knowledge of folklore has been included in the compulsory curriculum, ensuring its continuation in the modern society. Literature courses in primary schools in Lithuania and Latvia begin with teaching about folklore. The list of set books includes the fables and folk stories of their native land. The system of musical education is also based on folk songs. Children in Latvia and Lithuania grow up surrounded by ancient symbols, which are still used by writers, visual artists and composers. School education and family practices allow young people to understand and interpret these symbols.

There is no doubt that the literature of the Baltic nations turned to oral tradition when it started to search for its own identity and its roots. The majority of Lithuanian and Latvian writers dealt with writing down folklore stories – many of them still do. The fables they collected were published in sizable volumes. Many artists went one step ahead and enriched the folklore with their own work, or even their own lives. The works of two 19th-century Lithuanian poets – Antanas Strazdas and Antanas Vienažindis – were transformed into folk songs performed to many different melodies. The authors themselves became characters in legends and anecdotes repeated to this

day. Sigitas Geda, a contemporary Lithuanian poet, called Strazdas a ‘centaur’ – half man, half beast (the surname ‘Strazdas’ means ‘thrush’ in Lithuanian). The nickname may also be interpreted differently – implying Strazdas was half a literary being and half a creature of folklore (Venclova 1991a, p. 270). Krišjānis Barons, a collector of *dainos* called the Latvian ‘father of song’ became an almost legendary figure even before his death. His image combined many mythical notions of the forefather as the embodiment of folk wisdom, a singer and a diviner. Very few scholars could count on such support from the society as Barons. The state allotted him a life-long salary in recognition of his endeavours beneficial to the Latvian nation. When the aged Barons died in 1923, his funeral became an unprecedented manifestation of Latvian patriotism. Latvians buried their ‘father of the *dainas*’ with the reverence deserving of a king.

Since the national rebirth of the late 19th century, Lithuanian and Latvian writers completed the final transition from oral to written literature. Nonetheless, their work still contains a perceivable trace of the person of the storyteller, their gestures and posture. The most characteristic in this respect is the prose of the Lithuanian classic – Vincas Krėvė. His entire body of work described the Lithuanian countryside of old, its animistic and folk traditions. The writer made attempts to create or recreate the non-existent epic poetry in Lithuanian. He used the symbolism of the *dainos* and the parallelisms characteristic for folk song with skill and ease; the periodisation of his works mirrors the sequence structure of legends. Even though the elements of folklore in Krėvė’s works are but the building blocks and the semantics of legends is treated as a part of prose, his books may easily be compared to the Finnish *Kalevala* by Elias Lönnrot.

The post war period, which meant the loss of independence for Lithuania and Latvia, divided the writers of these countries into two large camps – the ones working abroad and those who remained in the country. It may seem odd that both these groups look for support in folklore, the culture of ancient rituals and in Baltic mythology. The works created at home and abroad contained the same motifs, the same rhythm. Kazys Boruta, a prisoner in the Soviet labour camps, wrote the novel *Baltaragio malūnas*, now counted among the classics of Lithuanian literature. The characters depicted there live on a single plane of existence with daemons of the forests and marshlands. A novel entitled *Baltoji drobulė* written by an emigrant – Antanas Škėma – is an example of an inner dialogue. It portrays the degradation of the modern man. The leitmotif of the novel are refrains of archaic Lithuanian folk songs, which sound like the “harmonious, lost language of paradise” (Venclova 1991, p. 261). The works of Algimantas Mackus, an emigrant poet who died tragically at a young age, boldly combine Lithuanian folklore with the imagery and rhythm of African poetry (Venclova 1991a, p. 256).

Folklore and the old world-views connected with it infiltrate professional art through various channels:

1. Subconsciously, as a part of spiritual experience, ancient beliefs still present in everyday life;

2. Consciously or subconsciously through traditional culture, which includes mythology as a 'cultural relic';

3. Consciously, if the artist makes deliberate references to mythology, studies it to find the answer to the eternal question of the meaning of life and conveying this meaning through works of art. Professional Lithuanian art offers many examples of such intentional and unintentional use of folklore and mythology. These include the plays of Vydūnas, the prose of Krėvė and K. Boruta, the epics by K. Donelaitis, the poetry written by M. Martinaitis or S. Geda, the works of M.K. Čiurlionis, P. Repšys, S. Kuzma and many other painters, the music of B. Kutavičius, A. Martinaitis or F. Bajoras, the ballets of E. Balsys, the movies by G. Lukša and H. Šablevičius. The mentioned works reflect the most important indications of perceiving the world – time and space, which encompasses the creation and the end of the world, the Earth, humankind, the system and changes of all phenomena.

In folk tradition, time and liturgical time were not perceived as linear. According to M. Eliade, mythical and religious time was viewed as incessant cycles, differing in length and importance: there were the cycles of human lives, the cycles of the existence of the world (from its creation until the end), yearly cycles, etc. When time is measured in this way, the entire world, death and life, the surrounding nature and even time itself acquire a new meaning.

Conferring a mythical meaning to space was no less complicated. Each realm had its middle point, defined as the centre of the world. From this centre, the world could be divided vertically into three spheres: the heavens, the earth and the underworld; horizontally it was separated into four cardinal points. In folklore, the vertical spheres were correlated with the horizontal ones and evoked similar associations. This interrelation differed from culture to culture, e.g. the Balts and the Hindus associated the underworld with the West, whereas Finns and Estonians located it in the North. Other interrelations also had a temporal and local aspect. The corresponding periods in different cycles – e.g. new moon and the creation of the world, childhood and morning – could be semantically interchangeable (Vike-Freiberga 1977).

A good example of such a perception of the world is found in the poem entitled *Metai* (Seasons) by Kristijonas Donelaitis. Even though it was written by a protestant clergyman at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, the poem refers to archetypes characteristic for folklore and derived from mythical thinking. The poem points to the yearly cycle as the most important of all. This was the cycle emphasised in rural folklore; all holidays, customs and rites related to it had a ritual and chronological nature. It must, however, be remembered that Donelaitis was not only an ordinary clergyman – he was the minister in a rural parish, and therefore his emphasis on the yearly cycle is not accidental. In Donelaitis' poem, the year is associated (as is typical for the archaic perception of the world) with other temporal realms; the beginning and the end are reflected by the corresponding phases of human life. In the part entitled

The joys of Spring the author devotes much attention to the act of divine creation and to childhood – a long digression enumerates the similarities in the nature of peasants and their lords, their childlike tendencies. The description of summer is a pretext to mention youth, the garments of young girls and the works performed by farmhands. In the part about the autumn, the author talks about old age, which necessitates putting on a fur coat. An old man called Prickus is mentioned – he spins a long tale. In the autumn Prickus' mare turns out to be old and Enskis' knife becomes blunt. The end of the world is mentioned. In the part describing winter elders say their goodbyes to the world; its final end – God's Judgement Day – is discussed. Donelaitis associates this season not only with old age, but also with chaos, which is another motif taken from folk mentality. This part of his work mentions theft, outsiders associated with the devil and death, destructive forces of nature that escape human control. The poet compares human life to the life of a clump of grass that grows, blooms and withers within a year (Venclova 1991b, p. 165; Vėlius 1992). Most probably, the introduction of an archaic perception of time into Donelaitis' works was not his conscious decision. Traditional world-views, still present in today's folklore, must have influenced his artistic work and are apparent in many other poems. The earth appears to be a living creature that covers its "naked back" in the spring and weeps in the autumn, as "our wheels claw at its clean back", which is not as much a poetic metaphor as a belief preserved in folk tradition (Venclova 1991b, p. 170).

Lithuanian artists active between the 18th century and the Second World War included elements of the mythical perception of the world in their works subconsciously, as a part of their own world-view. In modern times writers, visual artists and musicians make deliberate references to folk mentality. They read academic works on mythology and folklore. Thus, folk motifs re-enter the world of art, complemented and adjusted by the artists' sensitivity (Greimas 1990; Vėlius 1977; Vėlius 1979). To a great extent this phenomenon is due to the fact that the period of paganism is still considered the 'golden age' of the culture of the Baltic peoples. The neo-pagan movement has much following among the youth and the intelligentsia in Lithuania and Latvia.

The best examples of incorporating native folklore into artistic work are found among the art of Petras Repšys, whose graphics, book illustrations and frescoes contain numerous references to ancient Baltic mentality. Repšys did not content himself with the role of the illustrator; he devoted his time to studying ancient Baltic customs and traditions, and managed to gather unique material that had been scattered around various sources. He is the author of an outstanding set of frescoes entitled *The Seasons of the Year*, which may be seen in the hall of the Lithuanian Studies of the Vilnius University, painted between 1976 and 1984. They constitute a visual encyclopaedia of the life, customs, rituals and mentality of the ancient Balts. Repšys divided the small room with two columns into segments. The frescoes are composed of two semantically dissimilar parts: the earth domain, painted in the panels on the walls, in ochre

colours (these depict farm work and rituals), and the heavenly domain painted in dark blues (depicting tree-tops, birds, heavenly bodies, ancient forms of making music and gods). The realm of the underworld is represented by the memorial plaque in the floor, enumerating extinct Baltic tribes. Horizontally the frescoes are divided into four parts: western – depicting winter, the night and old age, eastern – showing summer and youth. The scenes of winter work and celebrations were painted on the western wall, the ones performed in the summer – on the eastern wall. Such an arrangement corresponds to the ancient Balts' perception of mythological space. A short corridor leads out of the room to the auditorium. Its walls are decorated with frescoes depicting the cycle of human life with its pivotal moments, including the birth, the wedding and death – and the related rituals. The frescoes also portray the realm of the dead, presented as the antithesis of the world of the living; a world in which everything is inverted. The Tree of Life is depicted with its roots upwards and the top below (Vėlius 1989, pp. 10–25).

Each day takes us further away from the times when mythology and folklore were the only means of conveying thoughts on the world and humankind as a whole. Nonetheless, folklore still inspires Lithuanian and Latvian artists. The 'high culture' of these countries, created by educated people, repeatedly returns to the motif of the lost Baltic paradise, the archetypical pagan community. Unfortunately, Lithuanian and Latvian literature is still relatively unknown in Poland and in the world, possibly due to its hermetic nature. The modern music and visual arts created by Baltic peoples are widely known and valued abroad, yet their literature is very difficult to translate, not as much because of linguistic concerns, but due to the frequent use of references to folklore and mythology that make these texts incomprehensible to people who lack knowledge about these cultures.

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